
CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH STORY TELLING, MUSIC AND THE VISUAL ARTS

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Abstract

Cultural sustainability at this time of cultural disintegration and denigration can be achieved through the arts. Artists propagate the consciousness for the need to reclaim the drifting and eroding ethical values for a saner society. This could be effectively achieved through re-telling and transmission of old-long ideologies, cultural facts and artifacts, norms, codes of conduct, etc. in a typical Igbo traditional society. Traditional cultural practices such as storytelling, music, visual arts are useful sources of cultural learning and education. They are veritable modes of transmitting and sustaining cultural tradition using oral narratives, folktales, musical lyrics and rhymes, artifacts and insignia, etc. Story books and texts, traditional egwu epkili, highlife music, liturgical music, symbols, art works and totems of different shapes have historical lessons and stories to tell about Igbo cultural heritage. The paper: “Story Telling for Cultural Sustainability through Music and Visual Arts” examines the use of folktales and myths in fictional texts to re-awaken cultural values. Specifically, the paper assesses liturgical music and traditional artifacts as channels for the propagation and sustainability of cultural heritage. The paper proposes need to re-orientate and awaken the consciousness of the people to the dwindling cultural practices and the urgency to arrest the development.

Keywords: Oral Tradition, Sustainability, Story Telling, Visual Arts, Liturgical Music.

Introduction

Art tradition explores a wide range of avenues in the sustenance of cultural values and norms especially through storytelling, folktales, myths, music, artifacts, visual arts in order to achieve lasting impressions and education on recipients. Storytelling, music and songs, and visual arts are old long African traditional experiences, and practices among people that are usually performed at various occasions and have become part of cultural and communal existence of the people. In different cultures “there is a similarity of intent within oral traditions around the world. In American Indian traditions, a story has at least two purposes: the first is to entertain, ensuring it will be heard. This requires awareness and knowledge of the audience... Secondly, a story must convey a lesson, one deeply appropriate to the needs of the listeners” (Joseph Bruchae Online). Thus, for the purposes of teaching, education and knowledge, cultural values are to be sustained to impact proper historical values on the individuals to promote the seemingly dwindling African cultural heritage.

Music and songs are veritable aspects of oral tradition. John Miles Foley in “Oral Tradition Communication” says, “oral tradition also called orality is the first and still most widespread mode of human communication. Far more than “Just talking”, oral tradition refers to a

dynamic and highly diverse oral-aural medium for evolving, storing and transmitting knowledge, art and ideas” (Online). Music with particular reference to liturgical music is a heightened oral rendition usually with accompaniment for rhythm and it leaves a greater impression on the hearers and worshippers. Hence, Kalu, Ikechukwu Anthony in *African Philosophy: An Ontological Existential Hermeneutic Approach to classical and contemporary issues* observes that according to Quarcoopone (1987) among Africans, “Singing generates the avenues for certain sentiments or truths, and in the content of rituals they demonstrate the faith of the worshipper from the heart-faith in God, belief in and about divinities, assurance and hope about the present and with reference to the hereafter” (Kanu 72). In all things, the spiritual enlightenment of the faithful is favourably considered in seeking for aims and objectives of liturgical music. Hence, it should be noted that liturgical music serves to gather and unite the assembly and set the tone for the celebration as well as assist the faithful in the realization and achievement of joy and fulfilment in the liturgy. Liturgical music as Best Anumba (2019) would have it in her words, “aims at beautifying and embellishing the voices of the worshiping community praising God in the Eucharistic assembly, lifting up to God minds of the people taking part in the liturgy, increasing the fruits of faithful harvest of the liturgy, as well as making the liturgical prayer more active and increasing the honour given to God”. Liturgical Music uplifts the soul, sustains the faith of the hearers and propagates traditional values and belief.

Visual Arts which are appreciated by sight leave a lasting impression on the cultures and values inherent in the African Oral tradition. Emman Okunna in an essay, “Visual Art: The Spirit of Development and Victim of False Impression” posits that “Art has been used to write the history of a people in visual terms. Works of art have become evidence of our people's culture and civilization” (*Eagle on Igbo Literature...710*). Visual arts in form of insignia and symbols provide historical knowledge of African values and they promote cultural beauty and ornamentation. In African philosophy, artifacts are symbols. According to Parinder (1969):

Arts is a means of expressing a basic philosophy of life ... Africans have a lot of artifacts that speak of the divine and the relationship of the human with the divine. ... For instance, the symbol of the *ofo*, which is an insignia of authority among the Igbo is made of a piece of wood carefully carved from the heart of the wood. It is used by every man who has a family and indeed kindred (Umunna) ... it symbolizes justice and a clear mind. (Kanu 69).

Visual impressions and symbols are durable and have stories to tell. They are sources of education and teaching about the African cultural heritage. The artifacts create visual impressions that promote significant practices. Hence, activities such as cultivation and harvesting of key crops, such as yam and cassava have cultural significance. Oyelola Pat observes that “yam is a very important staple food in Nigeria and can be prepared in many different ways. The harvesting of the first new yam is an occasion accompanied by ritual singing and dancing...” (31); such ceremonies are common in other areas of Nigeria and in African communities. The rituals, the stories behind the ritual, the performance and chants following them are residues of knowledge of cultural values.

This essay highlights several areas of cultural activities including oral tradition of events, dance and music accompaniments, symbols and insignia that create long lasting impressions and sights for future appreciation and signification through the various arts.

Story Telling in Literary Art

Storytelling in written Literature has cogent issues of cultural importance. According to Brosnan (1976), “the African form of education was never by definition or the use of abstract terminology. Apart from the African system of education which is tied to roles such as farming, hunting, fire wood gathering etc, the African got much more instruction given at night after the evening meal, on the way to the farms or the stream, in the village square or at moonlight nights. These traditional tales were presented orally, and are characteristically anonymous, homeless and placeless” (Ikechukwu Kanu 63). Story telling in families after dinner by a father for their children or at village squares at moonlight nights were in practice before the advent of urban civilization.

Literary artists such as Chinua Achebe preserves age long wisdom and code of conduct in their texts. In *Things Fall Apart*, teachings on communal co-existence and harmony are transmitted from generation to generation through story telling. For instance, the practice of keeping peace in the neighbourhood is exemplified in the incident of keeping peace during the holy week before new yam festival. This teaching is propagated to the younger ones when Okonkwo violated the code by beating his younger wife Ojiugo for not making his afternoon food available on time. The household and the neighbourhood learnt the repercussion of such unruly act as they observed the visit of Ezeani the chief priest to Okonkwo reprimanding him for committing *nso ani*. To send across the gravity of the offence the Chief Priest refused any form of pleasantries from Okonkwo, “take away your kola nut. I shall not eat in the house of a man who has no respect for our gods and ancestors” (*Things.Fall.Apart* 21). The effect of Okonkwo's action reverberates through all the villages because such has never happened in that cultural society. Elders including Ogbuefi Ezeudu the oldest man in Umuofia expresses shock too and tells those around him the magnitude of the crime of breaking the week of piece saying that “My father told me that he had been told that in the past a man who broke the peace was dragged on the ground through the village until he died”. (*Things Fall Apart* 22). This fact is told to the younger men and women in the village to sustain the cultural value of peace and to deter others from toeing the line of violence in spite of any provocation.

The content of African cultural values is diverse in nature; hence, “Stories, poems, proverbs, riddles, folktales, epics, myths and jokes carry a community's core morals, values and memories.” (Janet Jopp Fargion Online). In *Woes of Ikenga*, George Ndubuisi relays the various beliefs, myths and values of the people of Umuafor a community beseeched by the white missionaries and caught in the web of two divergent cultures and religions. At the death of Udeaja, a prominent elder and custodian of Umuafor, as it is the practice, grave digging provides an avenue for storytelling and teaching. Chinua, a close friend of the

deceased Udejaja presents palm wine for the diggers and keeps them regaled with his stories such that “people's faces gradually brightened as his stories went on. He also told of how he had fought the whole night with the thieves who had tried to steal *Ogwugwu* to hand over to a white man in exchange for money, and how he had lost seven of his valuable kegs of palm wine in the market in a last minute effort to meet the Messiah”. (*Woes of Ikenga* 23). The place of storytelling as cultural practices sustains the energy and peace of the community even at times of mourning. Chinua's story was a memorable event in the history of Umuafor, hence:

People could not help but laugh through their tears, thereby drawing the attention of other mourners towards the circle. This was one story that Umuafor was known for and mocked about. The crowd was delighted to be getting an unedited version from one of the few remaining elders who had actually witnessed the day when the popular Afor market had been completely deserted leaving valuable wares to the mercy of thieves and hoodlums. (George Ndubuisi 24).

This episode provides and sustains the history of the people. Making the people's consciousness attuned to the impending challenges.

Other situations of storytelling and lessons of moral code is given in Osita Amakaeze's *The Teeth of a Snail*. It tells the story of the delinquent lads Nkuri and Udene who defy old-long wisdom and wandered into the sacred forest and *Amama* River and met their Waterloo, Nkuri and Udene out of youthful exuberance and curiosity are the proverbial *Ofeke* “who had been warned to not drink the sweetness of wine but rather to the substance lest used it entered their eyes and dazed them. But they had rather would close their eyes when drinking so wine does not enter there and confound them” (*Teeth of a snail* 19). That was the scenario when the two boys wandered off “through the narrow path towards Amama River. Each step widened the greener and succulent leaf-littered path. A wrong location? Yes, they knew, but they had not actually stepped out with plans to go anywhere” (18). The ambition for adventure led the boys to continue in their escapade despite all warning signs and encounters. Still they continued. “One would think that Nkuri and Udene did not know they should not have trod this lonely path at such a sacred hour? ... Even as children, they had been informally instructed by folktales that they were never to go to Amama River, especially at this time of *Mgbachi* when spirits and wilderness beings rambled about. The seductive river glittered in the sun and beckoned on them to come...” (28). They eventually followed their instincts and walked into misfortune. Story telling is a means of education, and more so a means of sustaining cultural values and code of conducts. It transmits the ethics of the people from generation with the sole aim of teaching and education. These come in different shades, and are rendered at different ages and groups.

Story in Liturgical Music

Music plays an important role in the liturgy of the Church which cannot be undermined in any way at all. This is why liturgical worship upholds singing as one of its major parts since the praise of God is amplified by music. The primary aim and objective of music in the

liturgy is to glorify God. It is therefore carefully noted by the Church that the true purpose of worship is the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful (Sacrosanctum Concilium no. 112). Sacred liturgical music therefore qualifies as one to the extent it leads the liturgical assembly to the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful. Liturgical songs therefore carry a kind of aura that disposes the worshipping assembly to the absolute reverence of the divine. With liturgical worship therefore, prayer is expressed in a more attractive way and the mystery of the liturgy becomes clearer to the worshipping community. “The Sacred Congregation of Rites” (1967) forthwith declared that with good liturgical songs, the unity of hearts is more profoundly achieved by the union of voices, minds are easily raised to heavenly things and the whole celebration more clearly prefigures the heavenly liturgy (Instruction on Music in the Sacred Liturgy).

When liturgical music comes in the form of 'storytelling', gospel facts are properly described with embellishments and its effects deeply felt. The songs '*Obi Nasom*' by Linus Okwu and '*Nwuria Africa*' by Ben Agbo which were composed following the structure of storytelling have a lot to contribute in making clearer the facts in question. Both can possibly and comfortably occupy a credible space in the collection of hymns set for liturgical celebrations especially in Africa. While '*Obi Nasom*' can be used as an entrance song in the mass due to the scriptural foundation of the text, "*Nwuria Africa*" can be best used as a recessional hymn on mission Sundays. Both can still be used for some other occasions that involve folk or traditional backgrounds.

In '*Obi Nasom*' Linus Okwu tells a story that encourages the praise of God who is the creator of all things, visible and invisible. It goes: "*Obi nasom uso, mgbe m nuru ka ana-ekwu, ka anyi jeenu n'obi eze, onye ihe nile di n'aka ya...*". Drawing from the scripture, he deems it fit to say that a call to worship God in his temple is such that should ordinarily provoke joy and happiness in the hearts of the people. In '*Nwuria Africa*', Ben Agbo tells a story of how Africans perceived the presence of the Western missionaries who strongly promoted the Christian religion, calling on all to shun idol worship and other non Christian activities like; the killing of twins... Thus, "*onwere ndi ozi biara na be anyi. Ha siri anyi kwusi ife arusi, anyi kwusi igbu ejima...*". The story reminded us that the missionaries encouraged all to embrace the worship of the only one true God through his son Jesus Christ. Hence, the music goes further to extol same true God who has done so much for the African people evidenced in the increase in population, good life, joy and peace experienced by the people. He calls on Africans and Nigerians in particular to rejoice for the blessings God has bestowed on them. A blessing that comes along with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In all things, a better response to all these good deeds should ordinarily be that of thanksgiving to God for the gift of the missionaries who first evangelized Africa.

Both songs are simple, solemn and full of meaning. Hence, they are easy to be learnt, carry the aura of reverence for the Supreme Being and thus, establish that spiritual relationship which should exist between God and man. The songs are purely vocal and can easily be accompanied with the piano and some other traditional and western musical instruments.

With the idea of call and response involved in the two songs in question, learning and internalizing them becomes easy and simple. As such, when they are well rendered, the true simplicity and solemnity of liturgical worship will be maintained as well as encourage active participation in the superlative degree.

The Visual Art

Statements may be written. They may also be uttered in any given language. And so also ideas, events and indeed stories may be committed into literary volumes. But “More inexhaustible, complex, effective, evocative and enduring are the meanings encoded in works of art” (Okeke, 1995). Works of art are therefore like statements to be comprehended in visual terms. In Igbo pottery, for example, this assertion comes on very strongly in their surface ornamentations than in their forms. These are true even with other aspects of the visual art, and satisfy both the aesthetic and iconographic considerations.

In ornamentation of his pottery, the artist – potter draws most of this Igbo aesthetic visual referents largely from plant and animal life, and in some cases, the firmament. And so what has informed the use of these elements. They provide sources from which the artist – potter derives his design motifs even when they at the same time make statements in visual terms about things of importance among the Igbo in their cultural life. For example, among the Igbo cassava and yam are the most important food crops, and so the yam tendrils and cassava leaves used as aesthetic referents symbolize this importance. Among the Igbo, it is a taboo for anyone to uproot yams that have been sown in disputed piece of land, even if at the end of the day he is the rightful owner of the land

The delicate lines formed by the head of the kolanut known as *Isi Oji* are beautiful to look at as an aesthetic referent, and so come in handy. But kolanut holds so much more to the Igbo, which the artist–potter expresses in visual language using the surface of his pottery. Cole and Aniakor (1984) say of kolanut in Igbo society: “Hospitality ceremonies centre upon sharing kolanut and/or white Chalk, *nzu*, both of which are sacred substances used to bless any and every undertaking and to promote its success. It is difficult to imagine Igbo life without them”. In large areas of the traditional Igbo society the snake python is held sacred. And because of the sacred nature of the snake-python the artist–potter brings in its gliding patterns known among the Igbo as *ije agwo* in the surface ornamentation of his ceremonial pots. The curvilinear rhythms of these patterns are admired for their aesthetics as well as for making statements in visual terms about the snake pythons among the Igbo. Apart from being used on the surface of Igbo pottery, the python motif and its gliding patterns are also found on chip-carved doors and wooden panels, relief decorations in Igbo houses, and head dresses of a variety of Igbo masks exemplified by the ancestral *Ijele* and *Akwu n'eche enyi*.

One of the unique pottery pieces of Igbo – Ukwu is also adorned with different kinds of animal motifs including the snake python. And these were again done in very high relief. The handles of the pot are done in beautiful rope–like structure which represents what the Igbo in the traditional society refer to as *Eriri ibe nne*, making a visual statement about Igbo man's

strong link to his maternal relations, affirming an Igbo saying: “when a man runs for dear life he heads for his maternal home.” These referents, only a few of which have been examined here, perhaps no doubt agrees with the adage: “Language is art and art is language which communicates” (I. A. Olofe, 1988). So that when the artist uses his brush, palette and colours to paint, or his chisel and adzes to sculpt, or when he produces ceramic wares with clay or turns out graphic or textile designs, the artist is speaking in a language – the language of visual communication.

Conclusion

Oral tradition in African cultural milieu is a part of the existence of its people. So also is music and their visual expressions manifested strongly in their production of art, including wall and body paintings, sculptor and pottery. They are rooted in every aspect of the life of the people. Upholding cultural education and knowledge is the core of the ethics of teaching available for sustaining harmonious societies and institutions. Hence every branch of the arts; including literary, musical, visual, folklore is a veritable tool for orientation and re-orientation of the society on sustainable cultural heritage.

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